

# The Watchmaker

by Arsch Sharma

It was July, and the last of the warm Gulmohur shards scythed the sultry Delhi air with their bleeding blooms. The Watchmaker lazed in the grey sun with his head bent. His neck, thick and furrowed as a bull's, sheafed upon his droopy terry cot shoulders while slim, marbled plastic buttons pleaded helplessly across his pot-belly. As the street-side horological masters of the old, he sat barefoot beside his watch repair cart guarded by a curtain of wristwatches suspended in diverse stages of animation, with his toes searing in the sun like red mountain potatoes.

Hauz Khas market was alive with flies that Monsoon day, as it is all through Summer. Some walked about and primed their wings with their hind legs, and the others stuck to each other, fought for mates, and fucked.

Humans weren't much different in their spirits either—most were busy discussing politics to liven up their drab workplaces, hunched over their tins of home-packed rice and dal. Others, who were fancier, planned their weekends in denial while chewing on salubrious reams of kale and iceberg lettuce, secretly wishing for a drink that would knock them out hard enough for the week.

But here by the watchmaker's cart, time passed free from the sanctions of organised labour, and so he dozed with his arms crossed over his belly. And his siesta would have gone uninterrupted were it not for a little child with her gaze fixed at her feet, clutching her mother's defunct HMT in her pocket. She approached the cart with some apprehension, holding on to a watch that refused to tick forth: its seconds hand tracing the same old furrow—now a moment ahead, then a moment backwards, never budging hope. She strained her brow, employing her juvenile wisdom to figure whether the jangling coins she'd brought would be enough to get it out of this rut.

For some time, she stood marvelling at the curtain of wristwatches: dials in all conceivable colours—golden, pearl, deep blue and even amethyst. She brought her tiny palm to the display window, the illusion of touching these fantastic time-bracelets was engaging enough. She followed the letters painted on the cart: the deep crimson outlined with yellow in the curve of a ‘W’ followed by an ‘A’ and then a ‘T.’ Thus she spelt the bright advert, now slightly dulled under the clear, clandestine lacquer of time.

After it had been long enough, and she had grown tired of her fascination, the girl tugged at the sleeping watchmaker’s bush-shirt.

He sneezed out of his sleep and caught a glimpse of the small, curious figure with a short single pigtail of an anchor on her date-shaped head. “What do you want,” he yawned.

She produced the watch out of her pale, bloodless fist. “It won’t move,” she said. “It moves, but goes back to where it started.”

“Hmm,” meditated the watchmaker. “Yes, they do that sometimes,” he smiled, “but I can fix this.”

He twisted open the back case using some Feviquick and a pair of tweezers—the acid had eaten up some of the metal, but nothing unsalvageable. “It needs new batteries,” he said.

“Will a hundred be enough?” She produced a floral kerchief out of her pocket, tied into a knot that she’d been clutching all this while.

“Eighty would be enough,” said the watchmaker, “you can go buy some chips from across the road while I fix it, if you want to.”

He prepped his tiny eyepiece and wiped it against his shirt’s hem after blowing onto it, and brought his knee to his chest, which made him look like some wise, ancient octopod. The timepiece lay paralysed in the palm of his hand, and he let out a smile in an equal measure of pride and condescension.

Not much was to be done here, just some routine cleaning and a standard battery replacement, but time was at his mercy—the determining metronome of life, helpless before him. And he smiled at this robber, this slick dupester outdone by a lead acid disk smaller than a ten-paisa coin.

The child had clutched the watch in her pocket on her way so hard that her grip had bruised the leather strap, even cracked the cheap, flat crystal a little. She had to hold on to her in whatever measure she could. Nothing testifies loss better than a watch tine refusing to move on.

She waited nonetheless, hunched over a concrete municipality bench, for the impossible. Beside her, the roadside vendor continued frying crisps as she waited. She wondered what it would be like when the waiting would end, would the Watchmaker freeze in that very frame, would the world stop if only for a while, if not for as long as she'd been since her world had turned upside down? Or would someone see past her grief, and pat her shoulder after all these years of anonymity?

“It’s done,” he finally declared, and the child came over to the cart with a certain measure of disbelief on her face. She held the watch in her palm and looked at it—it wasn’t stuck at quarter past six anymore. She looked around, scrambling for the catharsis she had anticipated: a faint whiff of orange marmalade perhaps? She looked at the market, at the flies swarming at her feet, or the traffic, or the fancy façades of organic grocery shops—nothing had changed, except that now, the faded petunia kerchief felt a lot lighter in her pocket. And so, she went away, not clutching her mother’s HMT as tightly as she had on her way to the market.

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The night comes, and the windows light up. Phone rings get lonelier, faces don powder, rouge, and fancy garbs hung across shoulders, thighs and hips parade the markets, the pubs, the diners—any place but home. The Watchmaker sees it all: for a city so alive with ghosts, its streets are too g-ddamned bright.

A young boy, barely fifteen, had set shop beside his cart. And all sorts of light: yellow, green, red, and white had lit up their unremarkable corner on the pavement. The boy, with calves thinner than the watchmaker’s wrists looked plainly at his curious eyes.

“What do you know about Christmas?”

“What Christmas?” He asked, but a pair of LED reindeer horns flashed red and green on his head in response. The Watchmaker wrung out a little laugh.

But it got busy: a few college girls were asking after his fairy-light crammed wine bottles. Their voices wrapped fashionably around apathetic syllables while the boy kept following them for numbers. They bought some devil horns, even a reindeer headband after much

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negotiation, since it was off-season for those, and then walked off to a more Instagrammable corner.

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The Watchmaker pushed his cart through the streets, almost got hit twice: both times by jolly groups with thick, salty tongues and empty eyes. But our friend endured their curses, and other than a violent sway of the watch curtain and a slight exchange of pleasantries, it did not amount to much. It was this city's late-night music—men in beat down cars half-drunk and sad, cursing at anyone who crossed their way, or sometimes even at someone on the other end of a phone call miles away, with an almost religious conviction to defile their mothers and sisters and daughters, without a clue of what was eating them from within.

He went past the glimmering markets and shops, past the merry enclosures of desperation adorned with a thousand yarns of light, all robbed from shanties and corners of paling anaemic eyes.

And in the shadow of this garbage pile of the rich where the bones of this city lay, having long given up on miracles, he came to a yellow brick outhouse that he called home.

Tahmina was standing by the door leaning over the sink, hearing her husband barrow the cart through the untamed, wild yard. She went outside with a smile upon her lips like each evening. "The kids are asleep," she said almost in a whisper.

"Aren't they always asleep?" The Watchmaker's voice was devoid of any remarkable emotion. He heaved his paunch and set it down on the staircase, "Do you mind if we sit here for a while? Here, by the cart."

"I'll bring you tea."

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A faint wind glided across the dew leaves of the frangipanis across the road, and the stars hung bright that night across the sugary, ginger-scented sky.

The Watchmaker looked at Tahmina, their eyes had softened as they did each time they sat together under an open summer sky. They

were two refugees in this country called life who'd come to set roots in this vacant yard.

“What’s it going to be today?” She asked him with bright eyes desperate with promise.

He chuckled, “You’ve warmed up to my stories.”

“It’s only time I warmed up to them, there’s not much else that you bring back home,” she fashioned her lips, the colour of freshly ploughed monsoon earth, into a playful taunt. The shadows under her eyes darkened.

“You know how it ends Mina”, he said, evading her hopes. “There aren’t any more stories left to tell.”

And he looked at his hands, at his fingertips stained green from the lead acid.



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